

Report back on visit to Israel and the West Bank

The purpose of the visit was threefold. Firstly to recognise and commemorate the contribution of the 53rd Welsh Division to the capture of Jerusalem in 1917, secondly a wider fact-finding visit to the region and then to recognise and celebrate our own Christian heritage and links to Jerusalem.

Commemorating the 53rd Welsh Division

As a former minister and as a member of the all-party group on the armed forces I have a longstanding interest in the place of our armed forces in our society. I have actively supported and contributed towards the Cymru'n Cofio commemorations of the key dates of the First World War.

The WW1 commemorations inevitably focussed on the Western Front and the European theatre and this had the impact of not fully recognising the Welsh contribution to the campaign in Palestine and the wider Middle Eastern theatre.

In December 1917 the 53rd Welsh Division became the first troops to enter Jerusalem. The Ottoman Turks retreated from the city in the evening of 6 December and when the Welsh Division approached the Jaffa Gate in the morning of 7 December it quickly became apparent that the city was undefended. The Welsh troops immediately took possession of the old city and placed a guard on the Jaffa Gate. In doing so they were the first Western troops to guard the gates of Jerusalem since the crusades of the 11th century. This is a highly significant part of our military history and is one which is almost entirely unknown.



On Monday 25 February we placed and unveiled a plaque in the garden of Christchurch in the heart of the old city. Christchurch is the only anglican church in the city and lies within the city walls close to the Jaffa Gate. A small ceremony took place with readings and a message was read out from Brigadier Alan Richmond, Officer Commanding, 160 Brigade. This plaque will now be a permanent memorial to the actions and achievements of the 53rd Welsh Division in the liberation of Jerusalem. When installed it will also be the only words in the Welsh language on permanent display in the old city of Jerusalem.

Celebrating and marking the religious links between Wales and Jerusalem

The sponsorship that the visit received from the Evan Roberts Institution also created the space to recognise our own Welsh Christian heritage and the spiritual links between Wales and Jerusalem. The plaque erected in the Old City is of Welsh slate and is inscribed with the flag of St David and was blessed in St David's Cathedral before leaving Wales.

This inscription is to recognise that St David was consecrated as an Archbishop in Jerusalem and was given a consecrated portable altar, a staff, a bell and a tunic before leaving Jerusalem to return to Wales. The portable altar, which is believed to be this altar, still sits in St David's Cathedral. These historic and spiritual links were unimportant part of the visit and we would hope that we can continue to celebrate and strengthen these links in the future.

Understanding the emerging politics of Israel and the occupied territories

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is one of the world's longest and most difficult and intractable conflicts. The opportunity to meet with representatives of the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority provided an essential insight into the thinking which is taking place at present as Israel faces a general election with some significant uncertainties and where the Palestinian Authority is unable to provide the leadership that the Palestinian people need to reach an equitable agreement with Israel. Over the visit we met with Emmanuel Nachshon, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Israeli Government and we visited Ramallah to have face-to-face discussions with the Palestinian Authority.

The conclusions of speaking with these representatives was that there is a vacuum in the process at present. Without clear leadership from either the US Government or from the EU it is difficult to see how the regional powers themselves are able to reach any peace agreement in the foreseeable future. All the political meetings were very useful in providing a rich and broad appreciation of the views of the different parties. The visits to the Gaza border and the Golan Heights as well as the opportunity to discuss the military and political situation with the IDF and others has given us a far better understanding of the situation on the ground. At the same time travelling through the West Bank and visiting Ramallah gave us a very real sense of the security issues and stresses that many Palestinians experience on a daily basis.



Industrial and technological links between Israel and Wales



The opportunity to meet with senior innovators and managers in the Israeli innovation networks was invaluable. The opportunity to learn how Israel promotes innovation in different fields - from medicine to agriculture holds many lessons for Wales. Both the structures of support for new and emerging industries and to support innovators is clearly something with which Wales has struggled over many years.

The meeting with Ms Nili Shalev, Ministry of Economy in the Israeli Government, was especially useful because it gave us a real insight into the policies and approach of the Israeli Government in promoting innovation and the structures in place to

commercialise academic research. All of this has some very important lessons for Wales and the Welsh approach to innovation and economic development. This may become especially important in the future in terms of how we will develop and deliver policy in a post-Brexit environment.

Anti-semitism

The emergence of antisemitism in recent years is something which has disfigured the political debate throughout the United Kingdom, including Wales. As a Welsh Labour AM I have been deeply and profoundly disturbed, disappointed and ashamed by the failure of my own political party to deal effectively with antisemitism.

The visit to Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial was a powerful and moving experience which gave me a deeper understanding of not only the historical context of the Nazi holocaust but its enduring cultural legacy today. It was also an essential reminder that antisemitism did not start in Auschwitz but started with chauvinism and prejudice. The dangers of antisemitism in Wales today

are growing and I strongly believe that all Members have a duty and responsibility to understand for themselves the historical and cultural roots of antisemitism if we are to put in place the policies that will not only protect Jewish people living in or visiting Wales but also to eradicate the stain of antisemitism from our political discourse and national political debate.

Promoting peace



Clearly there is no opportunity for any of our national institutions to play any realistic role in promoting the peace process. However I do believe that there is a role that we can play in promoting peace between peoples. One of the most difficult parts of the current conflict is that very few Israeli and Palestinian people actually meet each other. They live in segregated communities or settlements with very little movement allowed between those communities. The visit to Kfar Azza on the border with Gaza was an opportunity to understand the difficulties and risks of living so close to an area where there is an active conflict.

There is an opportunity here to use sport or other social activities to build personal links and an understanding between peoples. The visit to the Shimon Peres Peace Centre was striking in that it clearly seeks to promote this understanding and may provide a partner to develop such an initiative. The Welsh Government has pioneered work in its Wales for Africa programme which has been successful in building and strengthening relationship between Wales and, in particular, Uganda. There are several projects in Israel which may have some lessons for the Welsh Government in developing and deepening these programmes. I also believe that the National Assembly and Welsh Government, as well as potential partners in Welsh civic society may well be able to build and develop a programme which may contribute to the development of understanding. I certainly believe that we need to consider how this may be possible and I would wish to actively consider further any contribution that we can make as a nation and as a National Assembly.

Conclusions

It was an honour to play a part in unveiling the plaque and commemorating the contribution of the 53rd Welsh Division and their part in liberating Jerusalem. The sponsorship of the visit by the Evan Roberts Institute was invaluable in helping to relearning the Christian heritage which defines our history and culture and the enduring links between Wales and especially Jerusalem. These links go back to St David and founding of the ancient Welsh/Celtic church in the Age of the Saints. At the same time the lessons of the past of antisemitism and its impact on the Jewish community have an immediacy in our politics today. I represent the town of Tredegar where anti-Jewish riots took place in 1910. This is something which still affects the town and its own self-perception. The political debate in Wales and elsewhere across the UK in recent times has seen an aggressive anti-semitism and increasing attacks on the Jewish community. I want to play my part in building and deepening links with the Jewish community in my own constituency and across Wales.

I believe that the National Assembly can make a difference and help foster links between peoples. Whilst the National Assembly does not have the responsibilities for international affairs and international relations, we do have the structures, the experience and the capacity to work alongside other partners to help develop programmes which may increase the understanding between the Israeli people and the Palestinian people. This would be a major contribution to a peace which is not simply the political peace process but a deeper and more fundamental peace between communities and peoples. I hope that at least one outcome of this visit could be a new opportunity to consider how this can be achieved.

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